

"A proper understanding of language can only be achieved by regarding it as a rule-governed activity". Discuss.

Part Two: Philosophy of Language
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Word Count: 2109

¹ Hanfling:193, but he does not think this statement true.

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The philosophical study of language has engendered much discussion on whether there are rules to language, whether speakers know the rules prior to their formulation, whether such formulation is possible, and what kinds of rules are applicable to language. This essay will concentrate on the first of these questions, with reference to the existence, nature and philosophical importance of the rules of language.

In order to fully explore the possibility of rules of language, we must define exactly what is meant by a 'rule of language'. Hanfling notes that "There is a sense in which it is obviously true that language is governed by rules ... the word 'rule' is applicable to certain aspects of language in a straightforward way."² Hanfling is referring to the type of rule that governs the grammatical structure of words in sentences, such as that proper nouns are to be capitalised, that, as Winch notes "It is wrong to follow a plural subject with a singular verb"³, and so on. These rules, Hanfling says, are incidental, and have little bearing on the fundamental philosophy behind language, they are not the sort of rule that can be used to "solve problems about other minds, necessary truth and promising, and, more generally, to explain how speech-acts have the force that they have and words the meanings they have"⁴.

Linguistic rules in a philosophical sense, therefore, must be ones which describe why language works the way it does, rather than how a particular language happens to be constructed. They must give an account, for instance, why it is that in a given situation, a certain sentence is appropriately uttered. Rules must offer a description of the proper usage of language. Wittgenstein ponders several senses of these types of linguistic rules; "What do I call 'the rule by which he proceeds'? - The hypothesis that satisfactorily describes his use of words, which we observe; or the rule which he looks up when he uses signs; or the one which he gives in reply if we ask him what his rule is?"⁵. Here Wittgenstein is alluding to several different classes of 'rule', and invites us to think about which type we expect to apply to language. In the 'hypothesis that describes his use of words' sense, we can see rules akin to natural laws; there is a rule governing how the angles of a triangle add up, but it would be strange to say that triangles follow this rule, rather than that their attributes can be described in terms of the rule. The point is that a 'natural law' type of rule should be taken as a description of, rather than a reason for a phenomenon. Linguistic patterns may be describable in terms of such hypotheses, but this is not what we are concerned with. So linguistic rules must be one of the second two types Wittgenstein mentions⁶.

But how useful is it to talk of rules? The phrasing implies that language is governed by something which cannot be broken without a fundamentally different activity taking place. This type of problem is brought about in part as a consequence of the common analogy between language and games. When someone broke the rule in football stating that one cannot pick the ball up, they ceased to be playing football, and were instead playing what later came to be termed as rugby; a fundamentally different game.

This type of situation does not cross over into language. The analogy is flawed. The rules of language can be broken, and if consistently broken, those deviations will themselves become the new 'rules'. It could be replied that this is exactly what happens with games, that people consistently picked up the ball and this became the rule of rugby, but the crucial difference in the case of language is that rather than some entirely new activity being created, either the existing language is updated with the new rule, or you are not using that particular rule, but yet are still using language perfectly correctly. As Wittgenstein states in *Philosophical Grammar*, "if you follow other rules than those of chess you are playing another game; and if

² Hanfling: 193

³ Winch: 53

⁴ Hanfling: 193

⁵ Wittgenstein PI: 82

⁶ (or a third unmentioned type. Or indeed both that W mentions, or those and a third. But not the first).

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you follow grammatical rules other than such and such ones, that does not mean you say something wrong, no, you are speaking of something else"⁷. Ziff correctly states that the notion of a language based on rules produces a picture that implies that "If the rules of the language are violated ... the aim of language, viz. communication, cannot save *per accidens* be achieved"⁸, and that this picture is confused.

In this regard, Ziff talks of regularities of language, stating that unlike rules, "The regularities found in or in connection with language are not sources of constraint"⁹. Snyder disagrees with Ziff on almost every point, stating that "a rule need not be ... a 'source of constraint'"¹⁰, citing examples such as the rule *allowing* castling in chess. But surely Ziff's reply would be to express the distinction between rules and regularities so that the constraining aspect is no longer essential; what is important in his distinction is that regularities do not define the possible courses of action, either by stating what is or what is not allowed. Instead, they constitute guidelines. Snyder also has a problem with regarding rules as being rigid, stating that in saying they are so "we are forgetting about rules for informal ceremonies ... and for informal games ... and we are ignoring the fact that there are rules of thumb"¹¹. But surely these applications of the word 'rule' are more aptly expressed as regularities? Snyder's objection seems to be with Ziff's terminology, not in the reasoning behind there being a distinction. Snyder admits that there is a distinction to made; "rules need not be specified, need not be authorized, need not carry sanctions nor constrain behaviour, need not be rigid and need not be constitutive. These are features of some rules, but not of all"¹² - yes, and those which do not possess these features are termed by Ziff as regularities, and moreover it is these regularities, not rules, that apply to language.

Wittgenstein seems to be thinking of rules in much the same way as Ziff's regularities when he states that "A rule stands there like a sign-post"¹³, here he is saying that linguistic rules guide rather than govern our use of language. Malcolm sums up this interpretation of Wittgenstein, stating that "(Wittgenstein) emphasises that following a rule presupposes a regularity"¹⁴. Wittgenstein points out that rules of language do not remove all doubt as to their correct application, and so require regularities before rules can be correctly adhered to; with his signpost, he asks "where is it said which way I am to follow it; whether in the direction of the finger or (e.g.) in the opposite one?"¹⁵, and highlights the absurdity of requiring further rules for interpreting the rules (and rules for interpreting the meta-rules and so on). Malcolm agrees with this point, stating that Wittgenstein's view is that "a rule does not determine anything *except* within a setting of quiet agreement"¹⁶, and persuasively cites Wittgenstein's statement that "The phenomenon of language rests on regularity, on agreement in acting"¹⁷, to which I would add his assertion that "Grammar consists of convention"¹⁸.

It is important to note when considering regularities that they need not be seen as conventions. Ziff identifies two senses of 'conventional'; matters of custom, and matters of general agreement. For the first sense, Ziff notes that "That a speaker in using 'I' may be speaking of himself is not a matter of custom"¹⁹, and for the second Ziff exemplifies

7 Wittgenstein, PG: 133

8 Ziff: 34 (Ziff's italics)

9 Ziff: 34

10 Snyder: 170

11 Snyder: 171

12 Snyder: 171

13 Wittgenstein, PI : 85

14 Malcolm: 145

15 Wittgenstein, PI : 85

16 Malcolm: 149 (Malcolm's italics)

17 Wittgenstein in Malcolm: 151. The translation is Malcolm's own.

18 Wittgenstein, PG: 138

19 Ziff: 26

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onomatopoeia; "the possibility of (onomatopoeia) indicates that not every semantic regularity can sensibly be characterised as 'conventional'"²⁰.

But does this talk of regularities actually elucidate anything, or does it simply shift the problems to do with a rule based language to problems to do with a regularity based language? Returning to Wittgenstein's possible senses of 'rule', that they may be "the rule which he looks up when he uses signs; or the one which he gives in reply if we ask him what his rule is?"²¹, we still have the problem that speakers of a language may not in fact 'look up' a rule, or be able to give a reply to the question of which rule he uses. Again, it could be argued that players of a game may not know the rules but yet are still playing the game perfectly well. Hanfling notes that people are often taught second languages by being taught the rules of those languages, but stipulates that "it would make no sense to suppose that one could learn to speak by 'having the rules formulated'"²². It would make no sense because in order to be *fluent* in a language, one needs already to know more than the rules or regularities; "the learning and use of such rules presupposes a mastery of language which could not itself be achieved by having rules formulated"²³. Snyder agrees, stating that "it cannot be that learning rule-formulations is necessary for having mastered the rules of language which they express. For in order to learn any complex verbal expression at all, we must already have mastered a good deal of language"²⁴. If learning the rules or regularities is not necessary to have learned the language, then the inability to express them cannot be a problem, and nor would a speaker's lack of knowledge of them be.

If not through assimilation of rules, how then does one learn language? Chomsky is of the opinion that "we may regard the language capacity virtually as we would a physical organ of the body"²⁵. This may be regarded as saying that the potential to acquire language is an innate ability, such as is the ability to climb ladders, run marathons and so forth. But still, in order to achieve these feats, some instruction must take place. Perhaps not instruction, as this implies an external instructor, moreover one who is consciously instructing. Perhaps some learning, for this can be self-initiated. This is not to say that a person could learn language without there being any other person involved, for such a claim would fall victim to the arguments against a private language. Instead, abilities such as language, climbing ladders and running may be learned without their rules, conventions and regularities having been taught. But this is a confusion. Chomsky states that the capacity for language is more like a bodily *organ*, so as to imply that rather than running and climbing, learning language is more like digesting food or breathing. With these analogies, it would be worrying to suggest that some learning must take place before we can perform adequately. It should not be thought of as an innate ability, waiting to be unlocked via experience, rather an innate *function of the mind*. In this sense, talk of rules can surely only make sense in a biological manner, and thus begin to look a lot more like the 'rules' governing triangles than Ziff's regularities or Wittgenstein's signposts. However, even if language acquisition is an innate capability, several important questions remain regarding what language actually is; certainly we have the ability to communicate, but why, and how, and how does our language affect our perception of the world?²⁶

As regards the gaming analogy, there are rules as to which moves are legal for a chess piece, there are regularities concerning standard openings and defences, and even tactics can be formulated as rules, or more accurately as guidelines (otherwise every game would be the same). However why chess is played is not subject to rules, that is to say that in order to

20 Ziff: 26

21 Wittgenstein PI: 82

22 Hanfling: 194

23 Hanfling: 195

24 Snyder: 167

25 Chomsky: 185

26 And so on..

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understand the concepts that describe chess, one has first to understand what it is to play a game, and this falls outside the realm of rules. Likewise, what it is to speak falls outside the realm of how one speaks.

In conclusion, it has been seen that of the several possible interpretations of 'rule', Ziff's idea of a regularity seems to be the most fitting. Counter-arguments have been considered, and have been found wanting. The regularities in language cannot be broken, for they are not rules, but they can be deviated from. Such deviations, far from requiring a new theoretical approach to language, or the reprimanding of the deviator, form an essential part of language. It is not essential, nor probable that language is learned through the assimilation of rules, conventions and regulations. Chomsky has suggested that the capacity for language acquisition is innate, but it is a question how far this gets us in attaining a 'proper understanding of language' once we have acquired it.

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